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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001597

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR DAS BRYZA, EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/03/2018

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SUBJECT: TURKEY ENTHUSIASTIC ON EVE OF GUL VISIT TO ARMENIA

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (SBU) BEGIN SUMMARY: Turkey is abuzz only two days ahead of a now-confirmed visit by President Gul to Yerevan September 6 to attend a Turkey-Armenia World Cup qualifier. Viewing the visit as a powerful Turkish contribution to promoting peace and stability in the Caucasus and to solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (N-K), press reaction has been almost uniformly positive; key NGOs have also encouraged Gul's attendance. Opposition party leaders, hitherto restrained in their criticism of GOT foreign policy initiatives, have criticized the proposed visit as a sell-out to Yerevan, arguing Armenia has not taken any meaningful steps vis a vis Turkey to deserve a presidential visit. END SUMMARY.

PRESS REACTION STRONGLY POSITIVE;
PROGRESS ON N-K ANTICIPATED

12. (U) Media reaction to the Gul visit has been overwhelmingly positive, with few exceptions. Mainstream "Hurriyet" Editor-in-Chief Ertugrul Ozkok, writing in his paper September 4, called Gul's decision to attend the match "historic and brave," likening it to the ping-pong diplomacy of an earlier era. "The winners of the football match are the Turkish and Armenian people," he wrote. Davut Dursun, in Islamist-leaning, pro-government "Yeni Safak," called the move a "major step toward normalization of bilateral ties with Armenia," and Omer Taspinar, in mainstream "Sabah," called it "a start for two nations, separated while living in the same land, to get close to each other and to treat their historic wounds together." Ismail Kucukkaya, in mainstream "Aksam," described the Gul decision as "not a personal choice, but a requirement of Turkey's maturity, tolerance and courage." Cengiz Candar, in liberal "Radikal" September 3, called a Gul visit to Yerevan a "giant step toward the future." He went so far as to urge Gul to go to the Genocide Memorial in Yerevan and pay respect to those who lost their lives. Such a gesture, he wrote, while not recognizing a genocide, would elevate Turkey's position rapidly before the international community and show respect for human suffering.

13. (U) Media reported September 4 EUR DAS Bryza's comments that Gul's visit to Yerevan was a positive move that could help solve problems in N-K within the framework of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Cuneyt Ulsever, in mainstream "Hurriyet" September 3, noted the N-K angle, arguing that "Turkey should be on Armenia's side in order to make ineffective Moscow's direct influence upon Yerevan and prevent the declaration of Karabakh independence in the midst of all this turmoil." Sami Kohen, in mainstream Milliyet, argued that a Gul visit to Yerevan would support Azerbaijani

interests, as Turkey would advocate for Azerbaijani priorities. Cenigiz Candar, in a separate, September 4 piece, argued that Turkey's hard line toward Armenia had not produced anything positive with regards to the occupation of Azerbaijani lands, and predicted the Gul visit would now pave the way for ending the Armenian occupation.

OPPOSITION COMPLAINS

¶4. (SBU) Nationalist Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal complained September 1 that the government is trying to reverse official policy without Armenia meeting any Turkish conditions for the normalization of reactions: formal recognition of Turkey's borders, withdrawal from occupied Azerbaijani territory, and suspension of GOAM support for diaspora efforts to promote genocide recognition internationally. He argued that Azerbaijan -- far more important to Turkey than Armenia -- should not be alienated. Ultra-nationalist National Action Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahceli argued that, by going to Yerevan, Gul was "bowing to foreign pressures and impositions and surrendering to Armenian lobbies, wounding Turkey's honor."

¶5. (C) Either ignoring or unaware of ongoing Turkey-Armenia talks, MHP parliamentary group vice-chairman Oktay Vural told us September 3 that MHP supports normalizing relations with Armenia, but argued that a presidential visit should be the culmination of a process, not the beginning. Like his CHP counterpart Vice Chairman Onur Oymen, he saw no positive steps from Armenia to justify such a visit. Armenia, he said, created its problems with Turkey, not the other way

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around. Vural further argued that it was inappropriate to condemn Russian occupation of Georgian territory while effectively rewarding Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territory. He also worried that any protests against Gul or Turkey during the match would compromise the prestige of the presidency -- the leading symbol Turkish unity. FM Babacan raised the ire of the MHP camp by likening Gul's visit to the contacts the late, MHP-founder Alpaslan Turkes held with then-Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrossian while in opposition in the 1990s. Tugrul Turkes, MHP deputy and son of the MHP-founder, dismissed any comparison, pointing out that Turkes' contacts with Ter-Petrossian were held in a third country and aimed at the release of Azeri prisoners.

NGOS, ACADEMICS ENDORSE THE GUL VISIT

¶6. (U) Long frustrated by the debilitating effect Turkey's policy of isolating Armenia has had on Turkish influence in the Caucasus, academics and policy experts have endorsed the Gul visit. Bahcesehir University international relations department Professor Hasan Koni suggested the opposition opposed the visit because they are not well informed about the recent situation in the Caucasus: "Turkey is trying to follow a policy that serves stability. Gul's visit will serve this aim." Istanbul University international relations department Professor and human rights activist Baskin Oran, who had earlier circulated a petition to encourage Gul to travel to Yerevan, said he was surprised by the MHP stance, noting the late Turkes' efforts to improve Turkish-Armenian relations. The CHP attitude, he said, did not surprise him. The Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD) issued a written statement September 3 encouraging Gul to attend the match. The statement noted that recent tensions in the Caucasus demonstrated the need for Turkey's "multi-dimensional foreign policy," and that Gul's travel to Yerevan would strengthen Turkey's position in the region. Center for International Relations and Strategic Analysis Chairman Sinan Ogan supported Turkish efforts to normalize relations with Armenia, but noted the risks associated with any failure to ensure adequate security in a large stadium.

DON'T FORGET THE GAME

17. (U) Turkish national soccer team technical director Fatih Terim held a press conference September 2, stating that the team is traveling to Yerevan to "play soccer, not war." Soccer, he said, is an activity that brings nations together. "Hurriyet" reported approvingly that Armenian soccer federation officials were preparing a Ramadan iftar dinner for the Turkish players. Enthusiasm in Turkey for the match is high, with hundreds of tickets reportedly sold and private tours organized to take the fans to Yerevan.

"BEYOND A SPORTS COMPETITION"

18. (SBU) The Turkish presidency issued a statement September 3 (see paragraph 10), calling the match "beyond a sports competition," and said it presented important opportunities for Caucasian peoples to create "a new climate of friendship in the region." Returning from Yerevan September 3, MFA Deputy U/S Cevikoz reportedly briefed Gul ahead of the announcement, describing Sargsyan's invitation as sincere and that the only potential problem was security. The Turks have taken note of GOAM assurances that Dashnak protests will be restrained appropriately. FM Babacan, along with Cevikoz, two top Gul foreign policy advisors, and a thirty-man security detail, will accompany Gul to Yerevan, where he is expected to remain five or six hours. MFA is describing the trip as a "working visit;" the two leaders will reportedly meet at the Presidential Palace before the match. Gul is expected to raise bilateral and regional issues and to pitch Turkey's "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform" concept; Armenian officials have already commented positively on the Turkish proposal.

COMMENT: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

19. (C) An early Turkish concern about Gul accepting the Sargsyan invitation was that it would raise prematurely Armenian expectations from Turkey for significant steps, such as opening the border, that Turkey could not take without equally difficult, reciprocal moves from Armenia. But expectations are now equally great from a Turkish public that

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wants to see its government engaged in trying to solve problems in the region and whose enthusiasm for the visit has been enhanced by the conflict in Georgia. Gul has put the prestige of the presidency on the line by traveling to Yerevan to attend the match. Turks will be looking closely at what he comes back with. END COMMENT.

PRESIDENCY PRESS STATEMENT ON ARMENIA VISIT
September 3, 2008 (UNOFFICIAL TRANSLATION)

110. (U) BEGIN TEXT:

As it is known, the President of Armenia Serge Sargsyan had invited our President to Armenia to watch the Turkey-Armenia World Cup group preliminaries soccer game.

The above mentioned game, beyond a sports competition, bears a meaning presenting important opportunities. It is believed that this opportunity -- which had emerged especially in a period during which developments that pull the peoples of the Caucasus region into concern are being lived -- should be valued in the best way by all parties. It is thought that a visit to be realized on the occasion of this match may contribute in the creation of a new climate of friendship in the region. Our president accepted the invitation with this understanding.

It is believed that the above mentioned match will create an occasion for the lifting of elements that clog rapprochement of the two people which have a common history and preparing a new ground. It is hoped that this visit would create an opportunity for the people of the two countries to understand each other better.

END TEXT.

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WILSON